THE SOCIAL TECH GUIDE TO EDUCATION

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Being a child of the 80s, I experienced the first wave of personal computing entering education: not being one of the smart ones who realised how important it would be to learn how to code, this mostly involved:

10 Print "Colin smells"*
20 GOTO 10
30 RUN

(Try it out here - still surprisingly satisfying)

This then progressed into learning how to use Microsoft Word et al. Today, as a father of two young children, it is incredibly exciting to see the cornucopia of ways in which the internet and digital are being employed to expand and enhance our learning.

Inheriting the mantle of the mighty BBC micro and its ilk, we have the Rapsberry Pi and Arduino, with Scratch, CoderDojo, Codecademy, CDI's Apps for Good and Black Girls Code being just a notable selection from a rich and wide set of organisations intent on giving the next generation the depth of digital literacy they will require to flourish and address the challenges they will face.

Image courtesy of CoderDojo

Schools are incredible fertile territory for innovation of all kinds, and knowledge-sharing communities such as TES Connect amply demonstrate. Teachers have embraced new ways to find funding - Donors Choose - and to better understand and support their students' learning using advanced data analytics - Equal Opportunity Schools, Knewton (and many others...).

The amount of educational material available via the web is in some ways overwhelming: the challenge hence becomes to present it in a systematic and accessible way, exemplified by Kahn Academy, Coursera and edX. Kepler, based in Kigali, use these MOOC resources as part of a low-cost degree, combining face-to-face teaching with online, on the basis that online alone is unlikely to provide the social component to education (with teachers and peers), which can greatly enhance the impact of learning.

Digital is also being used to provide vivid new approaches to education: Mozilla's Open Badges are accreditation designed for the web, Digital Explorer brings explorers and scientists into the classroom, Historypin allows you to explore the past through geo-tagged and date-stamped images, GameTheNews turns current affairs into mini-games, while Brainstorms introduces neuroscience using a mini-copter that you can control WITH YOUR MIND. And then there is MinecraftEDU, harnessing the power of the world-bestriding, billion dollar industry that is Minecraft and bringing it into classrooms. With initiatives such as Dublin's Bridge 21 working to test out some of these approaches, and stitch together learning using yet more digital tools, there is much more to come.

Image courtesy of Digital Explorer

In less well resourced contexts, digital is also having a big impact: Hole in the Wall, Dr Math, TeleTaleem, Text2Teach and BBC Janala demonstrate the extent and range of ways in which tech is delivering educational materials to widely dispersed communities, often using the humble SMS.

And to conclude, we must mention the mighty Duolingo - they have developed a set of high-quality, but completely free language courses. Using ingenious data-processing techniques, their users' input is actually translating documents for commercial clients (which is why the app will always be free). The biggest signifier of their success is their setting up of paid-for (but still low cost) certificates available in their testing centre (developed in response to demand from their users). When you quite literally can't give it away, you know you're onto something…

*Colin is now a very respectable father of three, and has excellent personal hygiene.